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# Concessions and Conservation: A Study of Environmentalism and Anti-environmentalism among Commodity Farmers



ELEANOR SHOREMAN-OUIMET

## ABSTRACT

*This article seeks to deconstruct the anti-environmentalist label currently attached to many rural communities around the world. The study specifically addresses supposed anti-environmentalism among commodity farmers in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and argues that it is overly simplistic to dub any community as anti-environmentalist before determining the historic basis for their motivations and beliefs. The data presented are drawn from onsite interviews with area farmers, community leaders and residents. The research indicates that although intensive farming practices have injured the environment and local residents have opposed environmentalist intervention, their actions and beliefs are rooted not in anti-environmental beliefs, but rather in an historical opposition to the federal regulation of agriculture. Today, Delta farmers are investing in and implementing conservation programs on their land. They are aided in their efforts by local conservation organizations working to recruit local farmers to adopt conservation in order to placate federal officials and rid themselves of unwanted regulations. This work is juxtaposed to examples of other rural communities around the world, similarly dubbed anti-environmental by environmentalist groups and state officials. Analyses of historic relationships of these other communities with the land and with outsiders indicate that, like the Deltans, these communities are not opposed to the preservation of the environment but rather to the intrusion of outsiders into their agricultural and economic practices. The paper concludes with a discussion of the local ecological knowledge that environmentalists and theorists stand to lose by continuing to exclude communities from the environmentalist discourse.*

## INTRODUCTION

Today, many rural communities in the United States and around the world are excluded from the environmental movement because of their perceived anti-environmental behaviors and beliefs. This trend is commonly attributed to the fact that many of these communities are dependent upon the land for making a living, and that they have been, or are thought to have been, more polluting than are non

land-dependent populations. This article addresses this issue by focusing on large commodity farmers in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta who have been cited by federal authorities and conservation organizations for over-intensification, water mining, polluting local soil and waterways, and contaminating rice crops with genetically modified seed. Although they maintain a use-based appreciation for the environment, and

remain opposed to mainstream environmentalist ideologies, this community has recently been motivated to repair their environmental damage and conserve their resources. This study examines their reasons for doing so and presents related examples from the literature to illustrate how environmental preservation is a culturally sensitive process—motivated by a range of different factors—and one that is inevitably complicated by cultural history and economics. This discussion includes an analysis of the term anti-environmentalist, and concludes with a discussion of the local ecological knowledge and rural support base that theorists and environmentalists stand to lose from neglecting and/or condemning these communities and their relationship to the land.

### ANTI-ENVIRONMENTALISTS

The following section includes a discussion of the term anti-environmentalist—those who use it and those stereotyped by it. In this article, the term anti-environmentalist is used to describe groups who have been cited for causing environmental damage and/or who have voiced their opposition to environmentalist philosophies. Although there are urban communities who share these sentiments, the groups discussed here are rural communities who are reliant upon the land for their income-producing (farming, mining, timber, etc.) and recreational activities (hunting, boating, all terrain vehicles, fishing, etc.). Although the term implies that the environmental damage is intentional, the following examples demonstrate that upon closer inspection it appears as though the majority of the communities so dubbed are not opposed to the well-being of the environment, but rather to the interference of outside groups and regulatory authorities in their internal affairs. This paper aims to demonstrate that greater steps should be taken to understand the underlying needs and cultural values of a group in order to determine what might motivate community-based conservation in similarly labeled groups around the world.

Some researchers argue that the labels of anti-environmental and anti-environmentalist are not simply

inaccurate designations, but are actually hegemonic labels created by mainstream environmentalists to marginalize and delegitimize opposition to their agendas (Rikoon and Goedeke 2000). While the injustice of this, as felt by so-called anti-environmentalists, has recently been documented by a small number of researchers (Howell 2002; Igoe 2004; Lynch 1993; Nygren 1999; Rikoon and Goedeke 2000; Shoreman and Haenn 2009; Smith-Cavros 2006; Smith Cavros et al. 2006) aiming to level the playing field of environmental perspective, environmentalism and environmental concern continue to be narrowly defined and represented by a small number of urban, liberal, highly-educated, white advocates and academics (Smith-Cavros 2006). In contrast, rural, land-dependent communities with low income and education levels—as well as large, subsidized commodity farmers, minority American communities, religious groups and political conservatives—have been excluded from these platforms because they are thought to be less concerned with environmental protection than their counterparts.

However, research into many of the communities that fall into this category of anti-environmentalist indicates that such opposition is not directed at the environment or the notion of its protection but rather at the federal regulators and environmentalists that attempt to enforce conservation (Hufford 2002; Raedeke et al. 1998; Rikoon and Goedeke 2000; Shoreman and Haenn 2009; Williams 2002). In Raedeke et al.'s (1998) study of cost-share conservation programs, for instance, the researchers found that despite their environmental concern, most farmers were not participating in the federal conservation programs. Based on the fact that more than half of the operators interviewed cited fear of increased regulation as the central reason for their lack of participation, it was concluded that attitudes toward the government have a significant impact on peoples' interest in and support for public environmental programs.

While such anti-regulatory sentiments have indeed led a number of communities to avoid participation or even protest environmental action, they have also

motivated some to adopt conservation in order to reap the benefits of placating state officials (Haenn 2006; Shoreman and Haenn 2009). The following examples demonstrate different ways in which communities have expressed their dissatisfaction with external intervention in local environmental issues, be it through opposition, cooperation, or discreet forms of both. This opposition often clouds the fact that it is not the environment for which there is disdain, nor is it the various ways in which it is possible to appreciate, conserve, and use the environment that communities oppose. These examples illustrate how it may be possible to motivate other mislabeled anti-environmental communities to protect their environment and to share their specific environmental knowledge with the global environmental movement (Shoreman-Ouimet forthcoming).

## METHODS

The data presented in this section were collected between 2006-2007 as part of my doctoral fieldwork. During this time I conducted over 200 formal and informal interviews with commodity producers (including rice, soybean, cotton and corn producers, averaging in size from 1,200-10,000 acres) and their families, as well as conservationists, agricultural consultants, seed distributors, chemical company representatives, federal employees, politicians and various residents of the central Mississippi Delta. The majority of people interviewed were Caucasian males between the ages of 35-65, as this is the dominant demographic in commodity agriculture in the Delta. However, there were also several interviews with Caucasian women, primarily between the ages of 40-75 who were also involved in agriculture to varying degrees such as a manager of a seed distribution plant, an agricultural reporter, a museum director, agricultural council board members, and farmers' wives who were heavily involved in farm decision making. Interviews also included meetings with male and female members of the African American community, typically between the ages of 50-70, including, landowners, farmers, former sharecroppers, laborers, high school teachers, coaches, and

merchants. Interviewees were selected primarily by word of mouth and recommendations from other interviewees but were also recruited to participate through sign-up sheets at meetings of the local Farm Bureau, Rice Council Meetings, and agricultural fairs. Since interviewees largely volunteered to be interviewed and/or were recommended by friends, I found the majority of people willing to participate and answer questions. Exceptions include those that requested not to be quoted, named or recorded. These interviews usually included sensitive material related to local social history and federal policies. Some farmers were also hesitant to provide specific information on their acreage and subsidy levels for fear that their neighbors might find out personal information on their holdings. Interviews primarily took place on site at people's farms, offices or homes and typically lasted around two hours.

Because this work began as an investigation in to rice production in the Delta, interview questions initially revolved around issues of agronomy. Typical interviews included questions concerning the farm, such as: how long have you been farming? What crops do you produce? What varieties? How many acres do you have under cultivation? Do you own or rent your land? What are your yields? What kind of inputs do you require? How many employees do you have? How much equipment? I would also ask about the types of changes they have observed while farming, for instance: What are the greatest changes you've seen in the land while you've been farming? Crops? Cultivation practices in the area? What is your support system (i.e., extension agents, agricultural councils, Environmental Protection Agency, Farm Bureau, other farmers, etc)? As well as questions about sales, prices, market access, and subsidies. During these preliminary stages of research I spoke with approximately seventy local farmers, as well as agricultural consultants and extension agents.

In the course of these early interviews, however, themes began to appear, namely the frequent mention of farmers' antipathy of federal regulation over agriculture and their efforts to conserve natural

resources and cut down on inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides. Thus I began to integrate these topics into interviews by asking questions relating to land practices such as whether or not a farmer followed till or no till methods, what type if any levee system did they use or had they moved to zero grade, what kinds of inputs they used, whether they participated in any of the federal programs to take land out of cultivation, and whether or not they belonged to the local conservation organizations and their opinions on them. At this point I also began interviewing board members and employees of the local conservation organizations, as well as employees of the Natural Resource Conservation Service, chemical company representatives, and local politicians as well as farmers. In total, I interviewed approximately forty individuals involved with the implementation of land and water conservation in the central Delta and asked them about the history of their organization and its relationship to the farmers, land use changes, policy initiatives, farmers' motivation to participate, and the obstacles they face.

Because such obstacles often originated with the area farmers' and landowners' fear of regulation and because they commonly attributed their opposition to regulation and external interference to historical events such as Reconstruction and the Civil War, and subsequent losses of labor and land, I also began to add a historical component to interviews by collecting life histories. During these interviews, individuals were asked to tell their life story, going back to when they were kids or, in some instances, to their parents' and grandparents' generation. In the collection of these life histories, I continued to meet with farmers, but I also began interviewing local historians, musicians, local lawyers, and state politicians, and spending time in local nursing homes with elderly landowners and longtime Delta natives; I interviewed a number of farmers' wives and parents. In total I collected just over one hundred life histories. Some of these were from the same farmers I had spoken to earlier in the fieldwork, others were told in the midst of longer interviews with new individuals. Most

interviews, however, formal or informal, focused on agronomy, conservation, or life histories, and tended to blend into the other topics, as well.

Interestingly, it was in the collection of these life histories that people's motivation for environmental action was truly revealed—this is where people most openly discussed politics, values, their concern for family land and their experiences with and feelings about the federal government. The following section is based upon the findings of this research and includes statements from many of the interviewees, although names have been changed to protect identities. In listening to Delta natives talk about farming and family history, it became clear that the environmental actions of the Delta community are two-fold: to preserve their family land and to prevent federal regulators from dictating what producers can and cannot do on their own property.

## BACKGROUND

The central Mississippi Delta<sup>1</sup> is just one of many rural American communities that have been at odds with the federal government and outside interests over local environmental issues (Howell 2002; Johnson 1999; Rikoon and Goedeke 2000; Williams 2002). In the last 15 years, the Delta has received quite a bit of attention for the environmental damage caused by local agricultural practices. Such violations include such things as over-intensification, pesticide use, waterway contamination, low dissolved oxygen levels in streams, soil contamination, water mining, and the contamination of crops with genetically modified seed. Large commodity producers in the area have also been personally criticized on the Environmental Working Group website for the subsidies that they collect each year despite these anti-environmental practices.

Ethnographic research I conducted indicates, however, that private, locally-staffed conservation agencies are utilizing cultural knowledge to effectively recruit community members to adopt conservation practices on their own land and in their use of com-

munal water resources by warning residents of the threat of federal regulation over cultivation practices if repairs are not made and cultivation practices do not change. These organizations, namely the Yazoo-Mississippi Joint Water Management District and also Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management, were established by a handful of the wealthiest landowners in the Delta who, according to conservationists, had both the most to lose from the imposition of environmental regulations and the most social influence over other farmers for the purpose of recruitment. As a result of such influence and the mobilization of these landowners', and conservationists' understanding of cultural sentiments regarding regulation, the majority of Delta producers are now complying with federal environmental requirements. Furthermore, because of their effectiveness in recruiting local participation, these private conservation organizations have been able to convince government officials to permanently lift conservation regulations from local farmland and waterways.

According to the conservationists, they are succeeding in this undertaking because they understand the historical factors and social stigmas that effectively motivate residents to act and why local residents are distrustful of the federal approach. They are aware of the fact that few Delta farmers are motivated by environmental well-being and that the threat of regulation, while real, is a better way to instigate local action. Because of this, they are able to use one discourse to motivate farmers to participate and another to convince state and federal officials that environmental standards are being maintained.

Although not rooted in any green ideology, these organizations' success demonstrates how an understanding of local history and motivation can aid in the implementation of resource management practices in historically anti-environmental communities. In the Delta, it is not the notion of preserving the environment that the local communities have long opposed, but rather environmentalists, federal regulators, and the restrictions that they attempt to place on local farmers. The following section provides background

into the origin of this stigma and demonstrates how the local conservation organizations have used their knowledge of this cultural sentiment to promote conservation in the Delta.

### THE ORIGINS OF ANTI-REGULATORY SENTIMENTS IN THE DELTA

Ethnographic interviews conducted with area farmers indicate that resentments over lands, lives, and income lost during the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement still linger in the Delta (Shoreman and Haenn 2009). In fact, there is a strong consensus among historians (Dunbar 1990; Killian 1970; Nisbett and Cohen 1996) that the Civil War and its aftermath created a culture of paranoia among white southern planters about the possibility of outside regulation. These injustices were perhaps felt nowhere more strongly than in the Delta. For while the Delta enjoyed far greater agricultural productivity than other southern regions, it also had much more to lose and was made more vulnerable by their precarious proximity to and dependence upon the mighty Mississippi (Highsaw 1949; Shoreman 2009a). For these reasons, according to many Delta residents I spoke with, external regulation of any kind over internal affairs, particularly those that relate to water rights, land-use and ownership are abhorrent to Delta farmers. The Delta farmers like so many rural communities wary of state intervention in land-use (Scott 1998) believe that their intimate knowledge of the environment is far more effective than any, more general regulation-based management scheme that the state could impose. Deltans believe that such intervention has hurt them and the environment before and they are concerned about the reoccurrence of such historic events (Shoreman 2009a). One Delta rice farmer summarized the local farmers' approach to regulation and conservation issues as follows:

The problem is, when the government thinks it's protecting, it's actually leading to destruction...it's smarter to take a proactive approach. We just don't respond well to legislation down here, so we take it to the opposite extreme. We act before regulation

can come in. Anytime the government gets involved, even if it's got good intentions, you never know what will happen.

### ***ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE IN THE DELTA***

The Delta has a long history of agricultural intensification, pesticide use, water mining and soil contamination (Shoreman and Haenn 2009). Although water mining is no longer legal in Mississippi since the state took control of the water resources, Delta agriculture still uses approximately 80 percent of all the water in Mississippi. Following a severe drought in 1988, state officials attempted to impose a water quota on Delta farms and, although most producers chose to pay the fine rather than let their crops go without water, the restriction alerted Delta residents to the possibility of more regulation if certain environmental efforts were not made. As a result, landowners organized the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta Joint Water Management District with the mission statement: "Develop regional water management options with minimum dependence on regulations" (Shoreman 2009b). These concerns were reinforced during a 1996 lawsuit in which the Sierra Club sued the Environmental Protection Agency, Region 4 for not upholding the Clean Water Act. During subsequent investigations of impaired waterways, it was discovered that the Mississippi had 72,000 miles of contaminated waterways—more than any other state in the nation (Shoreman 2009b). Convinced that federal authorities were now determined to regulate cultivation practices, as well as water use, Delta landowners formed another local conservation organization, Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management, in order to recruit farmers to participate in better resource management strategies and improve local conditions. Since then, farmers and conservationists have made efforts to work together to meet the Environmental Protection Agency's requirements and prevent further regulation over their cultivation practices. The following section provides just a few examples of the damage caused by Delta agriculture and the ways in which the Delta farmers and conservationists have attempted to repair it. As these examples demonstrate, however, their methods

of repair are rarely in line with environmentalist ideals, making it difficult for Delta farmers to receive recognition for their environmental efforts and/or ethics.

### ***EXAMPLE 1: DICHLORO-DIPHENYL-TRICHLOROETHANE (DDT) AND DISSOLVED OXYGEN***

According to Peter Dennison of the Yazoo-Mississippi Joint Water Management District:

Ten years ago there was a DDT [Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane] fish advisory put over the Delta when fish tissue samples began to show DDT and toxicity above FDA [Food and Drug Administration] acceptable levels. Even when the FDA raised its threshold of permissible DDT quantities in fish, five years ago, the Delta still exceeded the standard. With the poverty around here fish from local waterways is a food source. DDT accumulates in the bottom of streams and the concentration increases along the food chain and by the time people eat the fish, the concentrations are higher than they are in the soil sediments. To try and fix the problem, the corps dredged Steel Bayou, which runs from Greenville to Vicksburg. They figured that if they could get the sediment out, put it back on the land and keep it from eroding; we could alleviate the DDT problem. It worked, we found a 90 percent reduction in DDT levels in fish and now we are below the FDA thresholds. But this represented a confounding thing to environmentalists who are fundamentally opposed to an act like dredging. They don't see that there are some unique opportunities with dredging. By dredging and building bigger control structures to keep the sediment out of the bayou, we've kept the DDT down and made progress in many ways.

In addition to the Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane contamination problems, Delta conservationists have also worked to defend the levels of dissolved oxygen in local waterways. After Hurricane Rita, the Delta experienced a trough of dissolved oxygen levels that were virtually unheard of in any natural system. "We had huge record fish kills," says Dennison.

We didn't know how to explain it, but then I got to thinking—when Rita hit, a lot of harvesting

was just completed and a lot of organic residue was flushed off the soil into the streams. When the organic levels spiked, it increased the oxygen demand and the organic matter ate up all the dissolved oxygen. The general standard U.S. Daily Average for dissolved oxygen levels is 5 parts per million with no measurements below 4 parts per million. The fish must be at 4-5 parts per million. Well, after Rita they were measuring in at 0-0.2 parts per million. The Bogue Phalia was rushing at 7000 cubic ft/sec; it was at bank full and yet only had a dissolved oxygen level of 0.2 parts per million. That means there was something big enough to eat up all the oxygen. That's a lot of organic matter and field residue is the only thing in that quantity that could do that.

Despite the bad press that area farmers received for polluting the local waters with Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane and dropping the dissolved oxygen levels, Dennison and his colleagues argue that much of the problem lies not with the farmers, but with the standards. They believe that dissolved oxygen levels in the South might not necessarily match those in the West, even under ideal circumstances. Thus, they argue that the South should not be held to the same federal standards. According to Dennison:

It appears as though waterways in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida just don't need to be as high as those in Colorado or the Northeast's rushing bedrock streams. Salmon and trout are adapted to high dissolved oxygen environments, but crappie and catfish, the main fish in these areas, may be better adapted to lower dissolved oxygen environments, hence why they can survive in this climate. We are now urging the MDEQ [Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality] to recognize that we need a different dissolved oxygen standard for slow velocity, low grade, and high temperature waters. Anything else is unrealistic and guarantees that southeastern waterways will never qualify as healthy. I hope to end up with a more attainable water quality standard, 'cause in the past and right now, the universals just set this area up to fail. Better, more realistic standards will make improvements something that can happen in the real world.

If Dennison's hypotheses prove correct, the Delta would technically be able to achieve safe dissolved

oxygen levels. Perhaps more importantly, to Dennison and his constituents, however, is the fact that new standards would alleviate the scrutiny they are under by environmental groups and aid their efforts to convince federal authorities that they are indeed protecting their environment.

### ***EXAMPLE 2: CONTAMINATION OF RICE CROPS WITH GENETICALLY MODIFIED SEED.***

In addition to the largely negative attention that the Delta has received in response to its pleas for altered standards, high discharge and soil erosion rates, and water pollution, many of the farmers of the Delta are being further persecuted for the 2006/2007 contamination of rice crops in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana with genetically modified rice seed. The President of the Rice Council, Chris Nolan, told me:

There is debate about exactly where, either at a Louisiana experiment station or perhaps in the Puerto Rico winter nursery, some experimental gene cross-pollinated with some Cheneire<sup>2</sup> foundation seed stocks in 2003. This went unnoticed and the seed was distributed across the South. The amount of genetic contaminant is undetectable by standard detection devices, but using a tool known as the barcode piece in France, Greenpeace reps discovered trace amounts in a Riceland<sup>3</sup> product exported to the country in 2005. Not only was the gene not approved for human consumption, it was still regulated and the European Union had made it very clear that it would not buy any GMO rice. Riceland was contacted and immediately alerted Bayer ... On August 18th it was announced that this regulated gene had been discovered in Bayer and Riceland seed. The next week the price of rice had fallen \$1.5/ hundredweight. The USDA quickly got to analyzing LL601 (the gene present in the contaminated rice) and subsequently deregulated it, approving it for human consumption, but the damage had been done. The markets remain skeptical.

Although it has long been the fourth largest rice-producing region in the nation, the Delta's reputation for high quality rice was severely damaged by the

outbreak. They lost many international customers who were afraid of possible contamination from the genetically modified seed and some who claim simply that they do not trust that this type of thing won't happen again. As of 2007, international buyers were expressing distrust for the product and the growers. Although the 2008 global grain shortage increased sales again, the association of Delta farmers and products with genetically modified crops has damaged their reputation among countries and customers increasingly concerned with health and the environment.

As these examples illustrate, Delta farmers face criticism and the threat of regulation in many arenas: water quality, soil conservation, pollution and genetically modified crops. Deltans have many reasons to oppose their accusations and regulations—just as their accusers (Sierra Club, the Environmental Protection Agency, Greenpeace, etc.) have many examples of the reasons why Delta farmers fit the bill as anti-environmentalists. The majority of Delta farmers I spoke to, however, consider themselves the most knowledgeable and invested stewards of the land, and also believe that regulation over land, life, and cultivation practices to be a gross interference. For these very personal, cultural reasons, it seems unlikely that these various factions—each comprised of a multitude of different viewpoints and voices—will reach agreement as to how best to preserve the Delta environment. In fact, the Delta Council, a historically revered local institution that oversees the conservation organizations as well as those dedicated to levee maintenance, flood control, and social issues, states in their mission statement (Cash and Lewis 1986:157-158):

There is a danger in permitting well meaning but poorly informed outside organizations to propose solutions to area problems that most often are not compatible with desired goals or needs of the local people...Such is not the character of contemporary Delta citizens who vow that they will never forget their heritage or investing in the future and that they will adhere always to these guiding doctrines of protecting and promoting the Delta.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN THE DELTA

The role of local elites in the initiation of conservation is a well-documented phenomenon (Cronon 1995; Igoe 2004; Thompson 1976). In most instances, however, this process has entailed elites controlling access to scenic or productive resources for their own consumption and use. Amongst Delta commodity farmers, however, we are not seeing a community so greatly divided by wealth and access to resources, instead, the community is made up of relative elites (i.e., subsidized landowners) (Shoreman-Ouimet forthcoming). As in the case of the establishment of various national parks and wildlife conservation areas (Igoe 2004), conservation efforts in the Delta were indeed initiated by the wealthiest members of the community, however, here we see that the goal was not the exclusion of lower classes or native peoples, but rather the exclusion of environmental groups and federal authorities with the underlying goal of perpetuating intensive agriculture in the Delta.

In order to document the progress of area farmers for federal officials, Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management designed an evaluation of farms participating in their programs. Currently, Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management has over one million acres under evaluation or roughly 40 percent of all the cropland in the Delta. All of the farmers that score 90 percent or higher on the checklist of conservation practices receive a stewardship award and as of 2007 the membership of Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management had a stewardship level of 82 percent.

Delta farmers are proud of their dedication to the land and their participation in conservation programs, despite the fact that it may not resemble more traditional environmentalist tactics. Delta rice farmer, Darryl Landis, is one such farmer. "I'm not going to drive a hybrid [there are four Ford Excursions in his driveway], but I am not going to burn the rice fields anymore either." Another local

farmer, Scott Tavers, commented that the conservation organizations:

...have been instrumental in stuff like educating people about possible savings and providing information. They sure can tell you a lot of stuff you never wanted to know about what you're doing to the ground...but we producers really are conserving a lot more these days. We use a lot less water per acre now because of the new technology and land leveling, etc. We've raised borders around the fields so that water only leaves through the pipe. Side inlet irrigation cuts down on the cold-water effect, which is good for rice. All in all, we're using a lot less water.

As local farmer and President of the Rice Council, Chris Nolan, described it, farmers are driven to conserve because of:

...the wisdom that develops with age and over time about preserving our environment. We live in a unique ecology. This has been an unregulated environment for over 20 years. There used to be terrible chemistries, bad for people, the environment, and the wildlife. Delta F.A.R.M. recognizes that you need a certain amount of regulation to make things happen but that you don't want to over-regulate. We don't need to be policed.

Related to Nolan's sentiment, farmers argue that they prefer to deal with environmental problems, themselves, locally, and in their own way. In fact, Carl Trake, director of Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management, believes that is why farmers are willing to participate in the first place:

The entire process is controlled by farmers...People call Delta F.A.R.M. on many occasions instead of the N.R.C.S. [Natural Resource Conservation Service] because of their feelings towards government, big-bad government. The government, of which N.R.C.S. is a part, carries regulatory overtones, they enforce and carry sticks. They are perceived to be full of bureaucrats that impede progress and slow things down. People often want a much faster solution. Eventually they usually will have to deal with a state agency but F.A.R.M. will get them from A to B quicker by telling them where the red tape is going to be. We allow them to bypass agencies, but mostly they are calling us because they want to do it right and get something fixed. People will often

call me and say that they know they've been doing something wrong and they want to fix it. They are afraid of saying something like that to a regulatory federal agency. Regulators have to repeat everything they hear and it's these overtones that send people to a third party, to a non-regulatory agency, like us, to solve a problem. Our last resort is to send them to the regulatory agency. We want to streamline and bypass bureaucracy.

Farmers are pleased with this system and express relief that they have an organization dedicated to solving their problems without forgetting whom they are dealing with. As rice producer, Darryl Landis put it:

[Y.M.D. and Delta F.A.R.M.] are always encouraging us to act early when it comes to implementing conservation techniques and getting permits so we won't have a problem later. Those guys are attending meetings in other areas and around the country and they're telling us about what's happening to water availability elsewhere. They're trying to prevent that type of regulation from affecting us here. We're lucky to have 'em.

Local conservation organizations such as Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management and the Yazoo-Mississippi Joint Water Management District make no claims to have changed farmers' philosophies regarding resource use and/or environmentalism. Nor do they ignore the fact that the local stigma against regulation can pose a large obstacle to their efforts (Shoreman 2009a, 2009b). However, they recognize that farmers care deeply about their family land and that they are motivated to keep expenses down and to keep regulators off of their private property. These local organizations have used this knowledge to gain support amongst the local elite with large land holdings and thus much to lose from regulation. The social pressures exerted by such examples, as well as the demonstration of decreased input costs, have encouraged medium and smaller farmers to join in the effort. Whether they change farmers' beliefs about environmental conservation remains to be seen, but for the time being, water quality is improving and soil conservation is increasing. As Peter Dennison of the YMD

explains, “most people have reasons to care for land and water, but most times, it’s personal.”

The following section presents examples from the literature about communities who have similarly been condemned for their treatment of the environment. These examples further illustrate the idea that many so called anti-environmentalist communities are opposed to external regulation and that many are also involved in some sort of conservation and resource management. By comparing the Delta scenario to other communities, I hope to demonstrate the variety of players involved in global conservation issues and thus further the argument that no single formula will ever be flexible enough to motivate community-based conservation around the world. Rather, efforts must be made to understand community history, values, and beliefs because, as Peter Dennison alluded to, at the local level, conservation is personal, and finding a reason to care is the first step towards environmental preservation.

## COMPARATIVE EXAMPLES FROM THE LITERATURE

### *THE UNITED STATES*

Johnson’s (1999:82) analysis of Ely, Minnesota during the birth of Superior National Forest documents how the local community of Ely believed they were robbed of their ability to make a living when the federal government regulated commercial timber and closed the local iron mines in the name of environmental protection. Their frustration only grew when eco-tourism became the primary industry in the area and Ely residents were forced to cater to the tourists who inevitably represented, in the minds of Ely natives, the very environmentalists who supported wilderness protection in the first place.

Johnson’s study reveals an angry community. Not because the town opposed the preservation of the wilderness, but rather because its rights to use and control this wilderness were usurped by external authorities with a priority list which did not include

the welfare of the local community. Similarly, in Williams’ (2002) study of the former residents and descendants of the residents of Smoky Mountain National Park, she illustrates the resentment that some community members have for the park and for those that fought for its existence. Although the authorities in charge of evacuating these lands depicted the local communities in opposition to the preservation of the landscape, Williams explains that the majority of the residents’ seemingly anti-environmentalist protests were, in reality, protests against the “bureaucratic arrogance that erases local culture to refashion ‘natural’ space” (Howell 2002:84). This historical opposition of the Smokies’ residents to federal intervention came from the fact that in the midst of the Great Depression more than 700 farm families and an uncounted number of tenants lost their home in the park removals and the outsiders’ implementation of “nature” (Howell 2002:90).

Many other researchers (Clayton 1994; Rikoon and Goedeke 2000; Rowell 1997; Switzer 1997) have made an effort to clarify that opposition to environmentalist tactics and strategies is much different than opposition to the concept of supporting the environment. Switzer (1997), for instance, prefers the term “environmental opposition” rather than “anti-environmental” because the latter erroneously implies a philosophical opposition to the environment itself. In fact, Rikoon and Goedeke (2000) as well as many other researchers (Agrawal 2005; Berkes 2002; Brown 2003) have found that in the midst of their arguments against environmental groups, rural protestors will often express their support for environmental objectives. In fact, contrary to their opposition, such communities believe that their use of the land, their stewardship—the very thing that environmentalists claim to be the problem—is in fact evidence of their engagement in the preservation of the environment (Rikoon and Goedeke 2000). This further supports the idea that residents’ overarching concern is not protection or destruction of the environment but the consequences of environmentalist action and how the environmentalist goals might be attained.

### *MEXICO AND NICARAGUA*

While the examples of Ely, the Smokies, and the Biosphere Reserve Project demonstrate ways in which communities have opposed environmental regulation by acting out against it, in the following section we will see examples of communities, like the Delta, who despite their opposition, have adopted environmental preservation as a sort of tactic to prevent further regulation. The Delta farmers are not the only population to have adopted ways of placating regulatory authorities while still reaping the benefits promised by revised resource management. Haenn (2006) found such a strategy among the **campesinos** ('peasants,' or 'rural dwellers') of Southeast Campeche in Mexico who were pushed into a buffer zone on the outskirts of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, Mexico's largest protected area for tropical ecosystems. After an initial period of intense local opposition to the reserve and newly imposed restrictions on subsistence activities, government agents and farm leaders brokered a settlement in which farmers would receive increased economic aid in the form of sustainable development projects (Haenn 2006:226). Although this government aid calmed public expression of anti-conservationist sentiments, farmers privately continued to resist the application of conservation measures outside reserve limits (Haenn 2006).

Haenn (2006:233) demonstrates that the conservation projects provided farmers with the language and tools with which to appeal to those outside authorities interested in environmental protection: "Astute farmers soon learned to mimic conservationist rhetoric publicly while privately continuing to operate within their previously held constructs." And while a few Delta farmers, and perhaps some campesinos, have indeed changed their minds about the importance of certain conservation practices, the primary benefit for them, as for the campesinos, was the fact that their cooperation allowed them to take advantage of new subsidies while protecting their economic foundation in agriculture (Haenn 2006: 234).

Anja Nygren (1999) documented a similar situation in her work in Nicaragua. Nygren notes that the indigenous people she studied were approved as useful partners in alliances with environmentalists only to the extent that they conformed to Western images of "authentic others" who demonstrate stewardship qualities toward nature (Conklin and Graham 1995; Nygren 1999). Like the Delta farmers and campesinos of Campeche, the Nicaraguan indigenous people in Nygren's case study also found a way to get what they wanted by satisfying their opposition.

These non-indigenous colonists were well aware of what anthropologists and environmentalists wanted them to do: go back to nature and live in thatched huts instead of using modern medicine, and conserve their forests for future generations instead of clearing them for agriculture. They were well acquainted with the expectations placed upon them by those who occupied high positions in regional, national, and international development politics. In this situation, they reshaped their knowledge in order to fit better with the images of 'sound resource users,' seen as a prerequisite for receiving benefits from the donors (Nygren 1999: 281).

These indigenous people strategically negotiated which aspects of their culture and agricultural practices to emphasize or conceal. Simultaneously, they were reinterpreting and thus developing different approaches to sustainability (Nygren 1999). Although their reasons for conservation are not in line with modern environmentalism, optimistically, we might hope that such shifts in rhetoric for advantage might also have a dialectical feedback effect. It's possible for people to begin to think that they are indeed what they portray themselves to be. The indigenous peoples Nygren discusses may come to see themselves as natural and stewards of the land, while Delta farmers may begin to see themselves as protectors of the land. These groups may never have thought of themselves as such previously and such a change of perspective may never occur to those orchestrating the initial communal action, but this type of growth and development may be possible in situations such as these where the actors are heavily invested in the cause of protecting their way of life and convincing outsiders of their ability to protect the earth.

## THE IMPACT OF ANTI-ENVIRONMENTALISM

The most unfortunate impact of anti-environmentalism is not community opposition to environmental protection, because that situation rarely exists. Rather what is unfortunate is the number of communities and therefore storehouses of cultural and environmental knowledge that are ignored when a community is categorized as anti-environmentalist by governments or environmental organizations. Katrina Brown (2003) identifies the need for more pluralist understandings of different knowledge systems, values, and worldviews to inform conservation practices, for the adoption of deliberative inclusive processes to decide and implement conservation, and for the need to transform conservation institutions to support a more dynamic, adaptive and integrated approach to conservation and development. Howell (2002:98) contends that in light of such battles between environmentalists and supposed “anti-environmentalists,” it is time to look at the historical and economic realities that contribute to local sentiment and for researchers to critically assess the imposition of values from outside a region.

Not only must community-based conservation projects make an effort to consider all the social factors pertinent to natural resource management (Rikoon and Goedeke 2000:163), but there also must be efforts made to understand the social, political, historical, and socioeconomic story of the community, distinct from their environmental penchants. In order to understand how and why individuals feel certain ways about environmental protection, we must understand a community’s history of experience and the events, values, and beliefs that lead them to make decisions and rise to action as a group<sup>4</sup> (Howell 2002; Lynch 1993; Vayda and Walters 1999).

Smith-Cavros (2006) argues that both people and ecosystems would benefit if society could move beyond stereotypes and include people other than white middle class among those who are concerned with the environment. I extend this argument to include rural individuals who have been condemned for

their utilitarian environmental ethic. Not only could expanding our understanding of the environmental ethics of a broader range of people enable us to better understand how different communities interact and relate in different ways to the environment, but also it might help to convey the importance of environmental protection to a wider group of people in a wider array of habitats (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina forthcoming; Smith-Cavros 2006).

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## NOTES

1. By Delta, I am referring to the fertile crescent of land that stretches from Memphis, Tennessee to Vicksburg, Mississippi, about 7,000 square miles in its entirety. The area where this work was conducted includes Bolivar County and to a slightly lesser extent, Coahoma and Washington Counties. This is an agriculturally intensive region focusing on rice, soybeans, cotton, and corn.
2. Cheneire is a common rice seed variety planted in the Mississippi Delta.
3. An Arkansas based company with which many Mississippi producers buy and sell seed.
4. For a more detailed discussion of such methodology see Vayda and Walters’ discussion of Event Ecology which espouses the use of open questions and the event itself to determine causal factors rather than making one’s research an analysis of a predetermined cause: “What it does mean is taking ourselves either actually or by means of thought experiments to the time and place of those events and then asking ourselves what antecedent events occurring then and there could have brought about the outcomes of interest to us and could have kept things from turning out differently. In other words, the possibility we consider should not be confined to those prescribed by any single or simple agenda or theory...” (Vayda and Walters 1999:171).

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